Writers at Play

Making the Space for Adolescents to Balance Imagination and Craft

Mary Adler

Foreword by Elizabeth Quintero

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For Bryan,
who has taught me so much about the play of imagination

Foreword

Years ago, I visited a mother of a four-year-old child in the Head Start classroom where I was participating while studying literacy in graduate school. I had developed a nice relationship with the child and I knew she loved to draw and paint, but I had never seen her make letters, let alone write her own name. I asked the mother about what Celi (not her real name) liked to do at home. “Oh, she plays with her older sisters all the time,” the mother said. I asked whether they played one specific game or lots of different games. “Oh, almost always they play a pretend game of ‘school.’ Because Celi is the youngest, she likes to pretend that she is doing all the things her big sisters do at school. You know, because she is so little, she can’t really do what they do at school, but she likes to pretend.” I then turned to Celi and asked whether she did writing or reading at this pretend school. “No,” she said, “I’m too little.” So, I said, “Okay, well . . . would you take this tablet [the one I had been taking notes on] and just pretend to write like you do at ‘school’ while I finish talking to your mother?” “Okay,” she said.

I continued to talk to the mother about family routines and the brothers and sisters for no more than three or four minutes. Then I looked over at Celi, and she had literally filled the entire page of the legal-sized tablet with writing. Most of the writing was recognizable as conventional forms of letters of the alphabet. And, right in the exact center she had written CELI GONZALEZ in bigger, almost perfect, letters.

Maybe she and her family thought she was "too little" for writing, but through play, story, and transformative action, she had become a writer (Quintero 2009).

I have learned that children are the consummate communicators, questioners, and listeners. They weave their webs of connection to others in their families, communities, and worlds. They don't live or grow in a vacuum, and they don't sit in school and "study" to be adults, with their attention only on what "will be" when they are adults. They are experts at being "in the moment." All children, from all backgrounds and histories, learn through their stories while engaging in play and other daily activities. They experience development in multiple domains and engage in multidimensional learning when given the opportunity and encouragement. Mary Adler argues that this is true for adolescents as well, in particular adolescent writers.

She says, "A writer must learn how to *play.* Here I draw intentionally upon children's play for its foundation, extending it upward to adolescence and outward to writing." Play allows learners to be autonomous and active in decision-making. Adler's research shows that her hypothesis was correct.

> Their intellectual, personal, *and* social growth are likely to flourish in the playful world of imagination. Within this world, rules are bent and reconfigured such that impossible ideas become possible. Within this world, writers are motivated and engaged in experimenting with and constructing an imaginary reality that responds to their needs.

She documents that young children develop executive control (Vygotsky 1978) through play, particularly make-believe. She says that if we follow this logic about the motivating challenges set up in play, and the opportunities to explore ideas beyond our capacity in the real world, we can see why this is such potential for growth. I would argue that young children, and adolescent fiction writers potentially, may move beyond executive control. The synthesis of executive control and creativity and risk-taking makes success on many levels possible.

I am continually in awe as I observe, study, and work with children. Particularly fascinating is the way they play and seem to intrin-

sically bring in their history, culture, languages, fantasies, and realities into every play activity they create. It should be common knowledge that play is important, but it isn't. Many researchers, most notably Vivian Gussin Paley, have shown that young children, through their play, construct tangible dispositions and skills needed for both social development and academic learning. Play elucidates perspectives of possibility.

I am thrilled to see that Adler cites research that clearly documents how young writers gain much from their focus on play, this "focused freedom" for adolescent writers. Adler's work gives teachers both the philosophical and foundational underpinnings as well as the specifics of how to implement this type of experience. In her research, she found that regardless of achievement levels, gender, or economic status, students proclaimed the importance of imaginative play in their lives. She noted that Sadie explained that writing fiction is "good; it's an outlet for my anger and my issues." Matthew said that fiction, as well as athletics, helped him cope with the anger he felt after his parents' divorce. Jack reported that he used fiction to rewrite his life in a positive way, noting that, "I am not a very agile person so I always dream about being very fast and very hero-ish. Like Indiana Jones or James Bond or something like that. I like to write about those guys or write about my own characters like that."

Simply put, students who learn to play as writers benefit from both the play and the writing—the push and the pull, as Adler describes it. Negotiating lived experiences produces more successful fiction and more developed selves. This premise is at the heart of this book.

This idea of learner/writer agency and more developed selves supports my own belief that all literacy is—or should be—critical literacy. This constructing of personal and communal meaning and taking action according to that meaning is the most authentic way to personalize literacy. Mary Adler's approach to creative writing relates directly to my commitment to a critical theory framework.

Critical literacy, stemming from critical theory, emphasizes participation through personal histories, sharing of multiple ways of knowing, and transformative action. According to Freire (1997),

freedom can occur only when the oppressed reject the image of oppression "and replace it with autonomy and responsibility" (29). Freire felt that "the progressive educator must always be moving out on his or her own, continually reinventing me and reinventing what it means to be democratic in his or her own specific cultural and historical context" (308). According to Bakhtin (1986), language is intersubjective and social. Discourse always has a live meaning and direction. At the same time, meaning and communication imply community. Again, Mary Adler's approach to supporting, respecting, and enjoying young writers, in my opinion, is a pedagogical approach that reflects both critical theory and critical literacy. Her work gives young writers the space, opportunity, and freedom to create while they play and at the same time a safety net (or a bubble—with edges to contain the oxygen, as one of her students describes the phenomenon). They consider different realities, they dialogue, and they achieve transformative actions through their writing.

Adler is a big fan of adolescent writers and she supports their agency through encouraging play and responsibility. She notes that "the truly wonderful thing about teaching fiction writing is that teenagers also know how to play. They do it all the time—mostly quietly, even surreptitiously, when parents and teachers are not looking."

In the context of this brilliant frame for teaching fiction writers, Adler discusses and uses research from many sources to show different strategies for teaching writing and the varying effects of the different approaches. Also, she addresses the underlying nonnegotiable issue of what it is that "real" writers do. How do "real" writers exert their agency? How, through writing, can learners be supported in their agency?

Mary Adler articulates the duality and dilemma that most educators, especially literacy educators and writing instructors, face in these difficult times. She says,

> One voice intones, "Let's get serious—we must get our nation's youth equipped with basic literacy and communication skills to succeed in the workforce." Simultaneously, another whispers, "Hang on a minute—let's also cultivate

> higher-level thinking in our students, equipping them to handle the kinds of imaginative problem solving they'll need to survive intellectually in our complex twenty-first-century world."

From where I stand, it is the second voice that is screaming at us to listen. My years of experience and research help me to be absolutely sure about this. Adler proposes, "Fiction writing in particular poses an elegant, efficient solution to the challenge of gaining *both* literacy skills and imaginative flexibility." In other words, literacy skills and play can, and must, go together. Mary Adler believes that

> What these students need is to find the payoff, to see how carefully selected details and events drawn from real experience give fiction breath and form. This is where our writers need help—not exclusively with exercises or formulas for stories, though these have their uses, but with instructional support that overtly addresses the relationship between the two worlds, the verisimilitude that grows out of well-anchored fiction.

Verisimilitude. Celi Gonzalez understood that at age four. Adolescent writers working with Mary Adler do too.

Elizabeth Quintero

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Introduction

Playfulness, when the player's consciousness is fully operative, can be profound.

—Tom Robbins, in *Alive and Writing*

Let's begin with two questions: Why this book? Why now? We're in the midst of a high-stakes testing environment, with decreasing budgets and increasing challenges to education. As a nation, we have a lot to concern us. We hear the acronyms on the nightly news—the EPA, the SEC, our GDP. In education, NCLB and how well schools meet it—their AYP—make local headlines. In such a climate, writing a book on teaching creative writing—focusing particularly on the necessity for cultivating play within writing—feels somewhat schizophrenic. One voice intones, "Let's get serious—we must get our nation's youth equipped with basic literacy and communication skills to succeed in the workforce." Simultaneously, another whispers, "Hang on a minute—let's also cultivate higher-level thinking in our students, equipping them to handle the kinds of imaginative problem solving they'll need to survive intellectually in our complex twenty-first-century world."

Daniel Pink (2005), author of *A Whole New Mind*, would argue that this second voice foreshadows our entry into the Conceptual Age, a future in which "emotionally astute and creatively adroit people" will "survive and thrive" (2). By analyzing medical and corporate responses to a variety of right-brain-enhanced approaches,

including the use of play and story, Pink forecasts a growing shift in favor of conceptual knowledge. In other words, that first voice is no longer enough. Comprehending information is necessary but not sufficient. Students today need to be flexible users of information who can connect, imagine, communicate, and reshape what they know and do. Enter that second voice. Enter creative writing.

Fiction writing in particular poses an elegant, efficient solution to the challenge of gaining *both* literacy skills and imaginative flexibility. In writing fiction, novice writers engage in a wonderfully complex experience: They develop imaginary characters, explore new perspectives, listen carefully to feedback, and examine what works in the texts of others. They compose lengthy texts, revise both in process and more formally afterward, and doubt and question all along the way. They play with remembered images and experiences drawn from experience, using them to breathe life into the text and motivate further exploration. Hence, we might say that young writers in the midst of fiction writing are hard at play.

It should not surprise us that while they are busy at play, these young writers are likely to gain more than the text of a short story. Their intellectual, personal, and social growth are likely to flourish in the playful world of imagination. Within this world, rules are bent and reconfigured such that impossible ideas become possible. Within this world, writers are motivated and engaged in experimenting with and constructing an imaginary reality that responds to their needs (Berk, Mann, and Ogan 2006; Bruner, Jolly, and Sylva 1976; Daiute 1990; Garvey 1976; Vygotsky 1978). While they do so, they engage in an astounding range of activities that influence their growth both as writers and as adolescents—ranging from abstract thinking (Chukovsky 1963; Vygotsky 1978) and problem solving to rethinking social and cultural relationships (Dyson 1989, 1993, 1997) to building what cognitive psychologists call executive function: the ability to focus on a task, gain self-control, hold and use information in working memory, and adapt to changes in thinking (Berk, Mann, and Ogan 2006; Blair and Razza 2007; Diamond, Barnett, Thomas, and Munro 2007; Diamond 2006; Golinkoff, Hirsch-Pasek, and Singer 2006). As Diamond and her colleagues (2007) put it,

"although play is often thought frivolous, it may be essential" (1388). Let's take a closer look at some of these claims.

Abstract Thinking

Psychologists have long argued that play is a vehicle for abstract thinking. Think about the child who picks up a household broom, throws a leg over it, and makes it into a horse. This simple action has startling consequences in terms of development. Before the pint-sized Western rider mounted the improvised steed, the broom lived a purposeful life in the broom closet, its function restricted to sweeping the floor and perhaps a few cobwebs off the ceiling. Now it becomes a metaphor—an entry into adventure—released from its concrete meaning (Vygotsky 1978). Suddenly, the broom transforms into almost anything—a horse, a propeller, a flag, perhaps a scarecrow in an imaginary garden. The child discovers that meaning can be separated from the concrete objects themselves—and abstract thinking is born. If this example sounds old-fashioned, that is because premade riding ponies, called the "Plush Animated Stick Pony" at Amazon.com, have supplanted the need to create one from scratch. According to a recent history by Howard Chudacoff (2007), an increase in commercialized play products like these reduces the need to engage in valuable improvised play during childhood. This, in turn, reduces opportunities for abstract thinking.

As children grow into teenagers, the ability to engage—and desire to engage—in active, improvisational play may be less visible, but no less powerful, within the imaginative space of story. Here, too, adolescents manipulate their reality. Real-life sisters, brothers, friends, and neighbors can be changed in story into almost any kind of *character*, interacting within a new, fictional world. In story, our writers find a place to explore relationships, make characters act a certain way, and learn how that action influences others in the story. I argue that just as children grow developmentally from their play, adolescents grow from this ability to examine human interactions, to take multiple perspectives on a particular situation, to see events from an

opposite point of view. These conceptual gains in thinking are particularly valuable during the teenage years, when relationships—and responsibilities—are multiplying exponentially.

In parallel with Chudacoff's findings on the reduction of play during childhood, opportunities to develop abstract thinking through play with fiction have similarly diminished in recent years. Even before No Child Left Behind stimulated increased concerns with test scores, National Association for Educational Progress (NAEP) assessments were demonstrating a "decreased emphasis on imaginative writing and an increased focus on academic forms in the secondary school, to the exclusion of almost all other forms of writing by eleventh grade" (Gentile, Martin-Rehrmann, and Kennedy 1995). The dramatic rise in national and state assessments in the past decade have marginalized imaginative writing further. As George Hillocks (2002) discovered, the increased focus on testing has often led to theories and approaches to teaching writing that contradict best practices, research, and national standards—all of which support extensive writing in multiple genres and drafts. For example, he found that the Illinois writing assessment rewarded formulaic writing while specifically excluding the genres of fiction, poetry, and drama. In interviews, Hillocks found that more than 70 percent of K–12 teachers in Illinois were consequently "hammering away at the five paragraph theme." This obsession with form—combined with a marked absence of creative writing—is part of a dangerous trend in the marginalization of imaginative, playful thinking and writing in K–12 education. Hillocks concludes that its exclusion "harms critical thinking in the curriculum" (203).

Problem Solving

In fiction, writers develop the kinds of problem-solving skills that have been shown to grow naturally in play. Think of the adolescent writer hard at play in a world of her own creation. While she composes, she *inhabits* that world (to borrow a term from Donald Murray, to whom we will return in Chapter 4). In some ways this is

similar to what adults do when they become absorbed in a task that challenges their abilities and rewards their investment in time. Psychologist Mihalyi Csikszentmihayli (1979) calls this phenomenon *flow*: a space where one is so thoroughly engrossed in a task that time passes unnoticed. In such a space, *the immersion itself* supports increased learning. As Laura Berk and colleagues (2006) discovered, knowledge gained from that immersion in the imagination transfers back to the real world: "the more children engaged in make-believe, the more they talked to themselves to work out pretend characters' actions and to guide their thought and behavior during realistic tasks" (83). Adolescents engage in make-believe through the imaginary space of story, using it to figure out plot, dialogue, and conflict as well as problems emerging in real life, handed to characters to enact.

In the words of Jasper Neel (1988), a teacher of composition and rhetoric, students who play with writing—who take up the challenge to use language bravely in exploration of an idea—change in the process from a "finite, knowable 'self' into another text" (132). Each new "text" that emerges knows more about story, and people, and self than the previous one, because the act of writing, of play, helped the process of discovery along. The experience, as author Tom Robbins points out in the epigraph with which I opened this section, can be profound (McCaffery and Gregory 1987, 232).

Executive Control

Vygotsky (1978) theorized that play helps children learn to practice self-control and develop willpower. Recent research by cognitive psychologists supports these findings and recasts this concept as *executive function*. They also add that play helps children develop working memory and flexibility toward change. Recent studies have shown that executive function is a powerful construct, more closely associated with school readiness than IQ scores among entering kindergartners. As Diamond et al. 2007 explain, "Kindergarten teachers rank skills like self-discipline and attentional control as more critical for school readiness than content knowledge" (1387). The benefits

of executive function do not end in kindergarten; rather, Diamond and her colleagues report that "working memory and inhibition independently predict math and reading scores in preschool through high school" (1387). Conversely, lower scores in executive function tend to be associated with learning difficulties including ADHD.

Young children develop executive control through play, particularly make-believe. If we follow Vygotsky's (1978) logic about the motivating challenges set up in play, and the opportunities to explore ideas beyond our capacity in the real world, we can see why it is such a force for growth. It is multisensory, using the full range of imagination as well as aural, visual, and tactile elements. It requires language, as children self-talk to help problem solve. Building on Vygotsky's work, Berk and colleagues (2006) found fantasy play to be the strongest influence on the development of private speech. This talking-it-out approach helps children develop the complex thinking required to control situations and resolve behaviors. Best of all, children refuse easy solutions. Rather, they "continually set challenges for themselves" (83). Given the depth of possibility for learning, growth, and control, it's little wonder that Berk and her colleagues declare that "imaginative play provides a firm foundation for all aspects of psychological development" (93).

It is a small leap from make-believe in childhood to story creation in adolescence. Can story creation also help develop executive function? Many of the conditions necessary to write good fiction also appear in Diamond's criteria for growth of executive control: "What you are looking for is a fun activity that requires sustained concentration, holding [often complex] information in mind and using it ...and something that requires resisting what might be your first inclination" (interview with Valentine 2008, 5). As a reader, I am delighted to read a piece of fiction whose writer is having fun, concentrating, and testing out possibilities before leaping ahead with the next plot twist. Fiction develops best when the writer learns how to resist first inclinations in favor of what works for the developing, complex story.

In the next chapter, we'll look at optimal conditions for fictional play, arising *in the space between* having the most fun and imposing

the most structure. In other words, it takes some balance. Fortunately for writing teachers, it turns out that what works for story development also works for human development. So we can simultaneously help students develop their fiction, and themselves, as they problem-solve, think critically, and exercise self-control.

Assumptions That Underlie This Book

Before you begin Chapter 1, which explores the way that play works in teaching fiction, let me articulate a few assumptions that resonate on nearly every page of this book.

Assumption 1: Student writers have much to say; their understandings help guide our practice. I'm interested in how writers talk about their practice. I find much to learn from the idiosyncratic strategies that students articulate—strategies that often are unrecognized in classrooms, but that these writers turn to for help. Throughout this book, I use these strategies, as well as other student contributions, including their drafts of fiction, interview comments, and journaling, to help guide and shape our path. I use them particularly in Chapter 1, to illustrate how students use and adapt to play, and in Chapter 3, to explore successful revision strategies. I draw not only from successful, high-achieving middle and high school students, but also from those who struggle to achieve. And I ask their teachers, as the classroom experts, for their feedback and recommendations.

Assumption 2: Professional writers also contribute; their reflections refine and shape practice. Hearing a published writer reflect on practice is valuable, but it requires a somewhat different kind of listening than we use with novice student writers. What works for Maya Angelou, who says she writes longhand on yellow pads on the bed in a rented hotel room, may not work for adolescent writers—yet these published writers represent the recognized best in the field. As such, they provide a valuable repository of

experiences to us and in turn our students. They offer two "shades" of contribution, I've come to find. They offer exercises and perspectives on story elements, and in another light, when these writers reflect on their growth as writers and human beings, and the ups and downs of their lives, they contribute a vivid sense of the "being" of writer. As Tom Romano (2007) reminds us, it's good practice for writing teachers to "heed the behaviors of professional writers" (168). Such behaviors help student writers catch glimpses of their own future possible selves. I use these writers not as exemplars for students but as signposts along the journey, helping to refine our path and support us in practicing the art of writing *well.*

Assumption 3: Writing exercises are most helpful in context. There are numerous collections of creative writing exercises in the marketplace. And in Chapters 2 and 5, we'll explore particular exercises that are more and less effective, depending on how you use them. But my purpose extends beyond gathering a compilation of creative writing activities: Here I offer considerations for what kinds of exercises are most effective when and in what context. In Chapter 2, I set out several questions for you to consider as you evaluate any creative writing exercise to help you decide which activities to use with your students and curricula to meet your current needs. Later, in Chapter 5, I show ways to integrate writing exercises into a larger curriculum that is balanced with revision, unprompted writing, and reflective thinking.

Assumption 4: Unprompted writing is more valuable than writing exercises to your students in the long term. In doing the research that informs this book, I learned something counterintuitive about teaching creative writing: It's not the exercises that make the writer—it's the writing that makes the writer. Students need to function as writers, to learn how to create fiction that goes beyond the exercises. As writing teacher Penny Kittle (2008) puts it so well, "We assign topics and students respond by going-through-the-motions writing instead of from-the-heart writing

> that drives them to write well" (39). When students can avoid "going through the motions" and explore self-generated ideas, I've found that they inhabit the fiction more readily, make more substantive revisions, and draw more from real experiences. Supporting students in these efforts is the foundation for Chapter 4.

Finally, I want to thank you and support you in your quest to promote creative writing. Teachers are special kinds of writers, for they are writers with a pedagogical edge. There are writers who teach, and teachers who write. Both will find themselves in this book, for both sorts agree that adolescents need to write, too.

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